

Fire in the Bones: African-American Christianity And Autobiographical Reflection

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By ALBERT J. RABOTEAU

I ENCOUNTERED FATHER JOHN COURTNEY MURRAY briefly over 30 years ago. I was a student then at Loyola University (now Loyola Marymount) in Los Angeles. Late one summer afternoon, I was crossing the campus, heading for the library. I noticed a tall Jesuit walking toward me. At the same moment, we both glanced up. Our eyes met, and I nodded a "Good afternoon, Father." "Good afternoon," he responded as we passed. I suddenly realized, "That's John Courtney Murray!" I had seen his picture on the cover of Time. I had struggled through part of his celebrated and demanding book, *We Hold These Truths*. I remember being impressed that day by his stately bearing, the liveliness of his eyes and most of all by the fact that here was this brilliant intellectual walking slowly across campus in the late afternoon light . . . saying the rosary.

Fire in the Bones:

"The old meeting house caught on fire. The spirit was there. Every heart was beating in unison as we turned our minds to God to tell him of our sorrows here below. God saw our need and came to us. I used to wonder what made people shout, but now I don't. There is a joy on the inside, and it wells up so strong that we can't keep still. It is fire in the bones. Any time that fire touches a man, he will jump."

These are the words of a former slave, describing the religious services of his people just after emancipation. I first read and was arrested by these words 25 years ago, when I began to research and write about the religious history of African-Americans. The paradoxical conjunction of "sorrows here below" and "joy welling up on the inside" puzzled me. How explain this paradox? Over the years, the image of "fire in the bones" stuck in my memory and eventually became for me a metaphor of the distinctive character of African-American Christianity, a mood of

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joyful sorrow, sorrowful joy, or more accurately, sorrow merging into joy. Something about this mood resonated within me, stirring memories of forgotten ancestors whose stories I needed to learn, stories with important lessons not only for myself, but for others as well. I will try to say some of the things I've learned.

"Fine, but what's this 'fire in the bones' got to do with John Courtney Murray?" you may be asking. One of the central concerns of Murray's intellectual life was the problem of pluralism: What truths do we Americans hold in common? What basic principles can our nation, made up of people of diverse religious and moral values, reach public consensus on? In the essays published in that book I found so difficult in my freshman year of college, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (1960), he elegantly argued that such a set of principles, a "tradition of rational truth," could be derived from natural law. Given Murray's interest in the question of pluralism, an issue even more hotly debated now than in his day, it seemed fitting to take this occasion to reflect upon the truths we hold in common from the perspective of African-American Christians, a people excluded for much of their history from full participation in their nation and their church because of race.

The issue of race did not figure in Murray's discussion of American pluralism, nor did he take sufficient account, I think, of the symbolic value of history to bind a people together (or conversely, to keep them apart). Beyond allegiance to a set of shared principles, a prime source of identity for a nation is history, history construed as a set of interlocking stories that we tell one another about our origins and our past. I mean the mythic history that establishes our sense of national identity, destiny and purpose (Lincoln's "mystic chords of memory"). It is important to note that our sense of common history can change over time to accommodate our expanding awareness of the variety of who we are ethnically, racially and religiously. The expansion of our historical vision usually occurs in response to social pressure from some group whose story has been left out of the national story. This was precisely the impetus for the black studies movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's, the period when I came to intellectual and academic maturity. That cultural movement—mirroring the social and political movement to guarantee civil rights for blacks—effectively demonstrated that African-Americans, despite their absence from the dominant academic and popular versions of American history, had

been of central importance to the development of the nation. Moreover, the neglect of black history, not only distorted American history, but distorted both white and black Americans' perceptions of who they were. For a people to "lose" their history, to have their story denigrated as insignificant, is a devastating blow, an exclusion tantamount to denying their full humanity. To ignore the history of another people whose fate has been intimately bound up with your own is to forgo self-understanding.

Thus for many of us the attempt to recover African-American history had more than academic significance. I felt that in the recovery of this history lay the restoration of my past, my self, my people.

...I was born in 1943 during the second war to rack the world with death and destruction and untold misery in this century—a war which demonstrated the horrors that doctrines of racist supremacy can effect. I was born into a country and a part of the country burdened by racism and racial oppression. I was born black in the American South, in the state of Mississippi. I was born into a family of Indian, French, German and African ancestry in a small town on the Gulf of Mexico named after a king of France, Bay St. Louis. I was born three months after my father was shot and killed by another man, a white man, in Mississippi, in 1943...



Intending to help develop a new African-American historiography, I chose to write a history of the religious life of slaves in the United States. As I sought sources for my study, I became fascinated by the voices of former slaves as preserved in narrative accounts of their lives under slavery, not just as historical evidence but as voices that seemed to be actually speaking to me. These voices were special: They rang with the authenticity that comes from those who have endured brutal suffering and triumphed over it. In my historical writing, I tried to capture the tenor of these voices, their rhythms and especially the wisdom that they conveyed.

What did they say, these voices of elderly black Americans, who had lived part of their lives under slavery and all their lives under discrimination? They spoke of slavery as a central religious and moral fact in the history of our nation, a fact that could not be excused as an exception to the "real" American story. Their voices contradicted the proposition that America is the story of the gradual expansion of freedom and opportunity to a wider and wider group of people. The national story has to include the ongoing rejection and degradation of others

because of race. Those versions of the American story, therefore, that tend to be triumphalistic, smug or celebratory fail the truth. What's more, they are dangerous because they facilitate our tendency to ignore the terrible urgency of those who still live in the long shadow of the plantation, trapped in poverty and despair. The moral claim laid upon us by their ancestors' insistent voices is continual awareness that racial inequity was interwoven into the fabric of our society from the start and is still very much a part of its social and economic pattern.

...I was born into a family that was Roman Catholic as far back as we knew. I was baptized in St. Rose de Lima, a black church, and given the name Albert Jordy, after my dead father. When I was two, my mother, my sisters and I moved to the North, partly because of what had happened to my father. But we returned during summers to visit relatives down home. One summer down South I remember especially well. I remember one Sunday when we had missed Mass at St. Rose, so we went to the white church, Our Lady of the Gulf. We sat in back, I remember, squeezed together in a half pew. I remember going to receive holy Communion. I remember the priest carrying the host. I remember him passing me by and again passing me by, carrying the host in his hands, passing me by until he had given Communion to all the white people. I remember I was seven years old....

As I continued to teach and to write about the religious history of African-Americans, I encountered time and again the perennial charge that Christianity, as a compensatory and other-worldly religion, distracted black people from their situation and encouraged them to accept their lot as the will of God. "Take this world but give me Jesus." On the contrary, the voices I heard spoke, in the main, with righteous anger and prophetic certainty about the destruction awaiting this nation unless she repented of the evil of racism. God was a God of justice, they asserted, the Lord of history, who intervened in human affairs to cast down the mighty and uplift the lowly. And a whole cloud of biblical witnesses supported their case: the children of Israel freed from Egyptian bondage, Daniel standing unscathed in the lions' den, Shadrach, Mishach and Abednego safe in the fiery furnace, and so on and on down the litany of prophets, apostles and martyrs whose lineage they claimed as their own.

Slavery and racial exclusion contradicted the essence of Christianity. "Bear ye one another's burdens. How can the master claim to bear my burdens, when he burdens me down with the heavy chains of oppression?" demanded a group of slaves in 1774. Any form of Christianity

that condones slavery or racial discrimination is to that extent false and will be punished. "Ain't everybody talking 'bout heaven, gonna go to heaven." Slaveholding and segregating Christians practiced a perversion of Christianity. The segregation of black and white churches signified the existence of two Christianities in this nation. And the deep chasm that divided them demonstrated the failure of the nation's predominant religious institution, the major source of its common symbols, images and values, to achieve meaningful, sustained community across racial lines.

...In my home town there was a Roman Catholic seminary. It was founded in 1920 to train black men to be priests, because most other seminaries would not accept them. It was named for St. Augustine, since he was from Africa. My stepfather studied there. He was ordained a priest, but in 1947 he left. He left disillusioned and angry because of the racial prejudice he encountered in the church even among fellow priests. Years later he would still rage when he remembered the wrongs done to him and to other black priests. *Introibo ad altare Dei, ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meam*. When I was 10 I became an altar boy. The sound of Latin, the glow of candles, the fragrance of incense, the splendor of the altar, the solemnity of the saints' statues



surrounded me with sacred mystery. May processions, Benediction, daily school Mass, music, chant, the liturgical seasons, the sacraments, all supported within me a profound sense of the tangible presence of God. Despite my stepfather's experience, and my own, of racism in the church, I believed, as did he, that the sacraments worked (*ex opere operato*). From the age of 10, I wanted to be a priest. I wanted to stand at the altar and offer God in my hands....

So it was that when I came to investigate the religions that enslaved Africans brought to the Americas, I encountered something that seemed very familiar, a correspondence that Africans themselves had discovered centuries ago between their religions and Roman Catholic Christianity. The most obvious of these correspondences was the identification of Catholic saints with African spirits, so characteristic of African-American religions like Vodun and Santería. Though my family has Louisiana roots, none of us, as far as I know, served the *Iwa* (practiced vodun). No, African religions seemed familiar because they shared with Catholicism a sacramental vision of the world in which another world, a spiritual world coinheres with this one. Behind its flat surface our day-to-day world opens onto depths full of meaning, pattern and spiritual presence. Ritual, like a doorway,

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gives access to this spiritual world. Through ritual we step into a kingdom of divine light, mystery and wonder. The material objects of ritual not only symbolize spiritual realities, but make them present: Incense becomes the fragrance of prayer, the light of the candles becomes the flame of devotion, the images of the saints enable the power of ancestors to help the living.

Liturgical ritual in African religions, as in Catholicism, culminates in moments of transparency between the worlds when the divine and the human touch and life becomes transformed. From this perspective, our society, in general, seems ritually and symbolically impoverished. (The national civic symbols and rituals that do exist are weak and shallow sources of identity and community.) Societies need ritual to transmit meaning and value from one generation to another. Without effective and affective shared rituals our sense of community atrophies. We are left with the symbols manufactured by mass culture for ceremonies of common consumption.

There were correspondences that obtained between African religions and Protestantism as well, though more subtle than those associated with Catholicism. In the emotional preaching and ecstatic behavior of Baptist and Methodist revival services, African-American slaves encountered a ritual equivalent to the spirit-possession ceremonies of Africa. The crucial factor in linking the two traditions was a common conviction that authentic worship required an observable *experience* of the divine presence. "It ain't enough to talk about God, you've got to feel him moving on the altar of your heart," as one former slave explained. Ritual, in this liturgical perspective, is supposed to bring the divine tangibly (so to speak) into this world. The presence of God becomes manifest in the words, the gestures and the bodies of the believers. Their praying, singing, preaching and dancing occasion as well as signal the Spirit's arrival. In this form of African and African-American liturgical ritual the divine becomes *embodied* in the faithful. The emotional ecstasy of black Protestant worship symbolizes a profound religious truth: the preeminent place of God's presence in this world is the person. His altar is the human heart. Moreover, it is the whole person, body as well as spirit, that makes God present. In a society chronically split between body and spirit, African-American ritual exemplifies embodied spirit and inspirited body in gesture, dance, song and per-

formed word. In worship the human becomes an icon of God. A radically personal vision of life flows from this liturgical sensibility. Contrary to the depersonalizing pressures of slavery and racial oppression, the person is of ultimate value because an image of the divine. Anything, then, that defaces that image is sacrilegious.

As I wrote and taught about African religions, their transmission and transformation in America, I realized that here was a legacy of wisdom about the nature of the world and people in the world from which we all could benefit. Contemporary perspectives might be complemented and enhanced by the traditions of these ancient societies, unknown to most of us. For example: In the personalized world of traditional African religion the self is conceived of as relational. Each person is constituted by a web of interpersonal relationships. Our health, our fortune, our very life depends upon the state of our relationships with others, including those who have gone before, our ancestors, who continue to figure prominently in the progress of our lives. By contrast, the tendency of American culture to overemphasize the individualized self makes life seem shallow, empty of the communal presence that gives depth and background to our existence. Similarly, a greater appreciation of the self as relational might help us perceive the selfish desire for aggrandizement hiding behind many of our images of success. To achieve at the expense of others, from the perspective of traditional African religions, is witchcraft, pure and simple. And if you choose to move too far outside or too far above your community, you risk becoming bewitched.

... In Bay St. Louis, unlike the North, there always seemed to be time and space enough for the long-time love. In the evening twilight we gathered for supper. The table was heavy with food, laughter and stories, stories about the old people that went on long into the night, until the last warm sweet sip of anisette placed a benediction on the evening. I heard stories about my great-grandmother, who'd been a slave. She had to flee New Orleans with her son, my grandfather, because his father, a merchant mariner, wanted to take the boy with him when he returned to Germany. They remembered my great-grandmother starching and ironing white shirtwaists while singing snatches of opera she had heard in New Orleans. Her grandchildren used to

laugh behind her back and call her "Black Patty" after the famous Fisk Jubilee singer. There was no rush about them, as with the people up North. They attended carefully to the daily tasks of community. Graciousness with others, gentleness, generosity, care, kindness, politeness, these were the virtues of down home. Being known, because my grandparents were known, I glimpsed the deep patterns of my people, patterns that healed. These were my people. They had an ease about them that put others at ease, like a warm embrace. Up North, black Catholics were few. I was one of a handful of black students in St. Thomas School. I didn't say it, but I felt different, alone, far from my people, far from home....

A peculiar people, Americans have always thought of themselves as a chosen people, specially blessed by God with freedom, liberty and prosperity. At best, this national myth of chosenness has supported ideals of service, tolerance and freedom—at worst, attitudes of chauvinism, materialism and militarism. African-American Christianity has continuously confronted the nation with troubling questions about the myth of chosenness. After all, if Americans are the New Israel and America the Promised Land, what are we to make of the perennial claims of black Christians that they are the children of Israel, at last freed from slavery, but still far from crossing into the Promised Land? Election, moreover, brings not only preeminence, elevation and glory, but, as black Christians knew all too well, humiliation, suffering and rejection. Chosenness, as reflected in the life of Jesus, led to a cross. The lives of his disciples have been signed with that cross. To be chosen, in this perspective, means joining company not with the powerful, but with those who suffer, the outcast, the poor, the wretched of the earth. Being chosen means entering the mystery of suffering in the sure hope of coming through to the other side.

African-American Christians believed they were a chosen people, not because they were black, nor because they suffered, but because their history fit the pattern of salvation revealed to them in the Bible. If Christ came as the suffering servant, who resembled him more, the master or the slave? Their lives modeled the paradoxes of the Gospel: in weakness lies strength; in loss, gain; in death, life. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."

The problem of suffering was complicated for black Christians by racism. The traditional justification for slavery stated that God intended black people to be slaves. In accepting their suffering, black Christians were not accepting the racist argument that God intended them to suffer; they were asserting that chosenness empowers people to make something out of suffering. In the end, suffering is a fact of life. We can try to ignore it, evade it, deaden it, overpower it, but only at the cost of our humanity.

To recognize that life brings suffering does not mean we must simply succumb to fatalistic resignation. No, suffering and injustice must be challenged at the deepest existential level, the level of defeat and despair that Christ overcame through his passion, death and resurrection. In this sense, African-American Christianity is a paradigm of the central mystery of the Gospel—sorrow becomes joy, suffering turns into transcendence, death yields life.

We should not underestimate the difficulty of living such beliefs. The temptations to despair, to reject Christianity as white man's religion, to abandon belief in a God who permits the innocent to suffer were by all accounts very real. Like Job, black Christians received no logical answer to the question of why they suffered, but only the command to trust in God. Like Jacob, they wrestled all night and instead of achieving victory gained only a blessing. Two sources sustained them in their struggle against despair, the personal experience of conversion and the communal experience of worship. The conversion experiences of the black Christian grounded his or her identity in the knowledge that he or she was accepted by God, indeed was of ultimate value in the eyes of God, no matter what white people thought.

...I travel to the low country of Georgia and South Carolina coastal islands to talk to elderly black Christians about their experience of conversion, about a process called seeking they underwent many years ago. Led by the Spirit into the wilderness to pray, each had a spiritual father or mother to examine their dreams and visions and to guide them in the way of salvation. Now in their 80's and 90's, these are poor, hard-pressed people, who've been poor all their lives. They've been through the fire and refined like gold. When they speak about their conversion experiences of 60 and 70 years ago, their faces light up with joy. I ask one 95-year-old man what the difference is between his time and mine. "Love," he replied. "Too much love has gone out of the world. We didn't have nothing and we helped one another. Now it seems like all everybody is interested in is making the dollar."

From black people like these came a music that constitutes one of this nation's most significant contributions to world culture. And many around the world have been moved by their songs, songs that transform the particular suffering of one people into a parable of universal human experience. What is the meaning in all this sorrow? What good is it? Simply this: It must be lived through. It cannot be evaded by any of the subterfuges of power or spurious means of escape devised by people to distract one another from reality. Life in a minor key is life as it is, bitter-sweet, joyful sadness. Unless we are mature enough, realistic enough to accept sorrow, we will never be able truly to laugh, to be genuinely creative, to love authentically. Instead we succumb to illusion, becoming preoccupied by an ever-spiraling cycle of needs in a vain attempt to

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deny suffering and death. We become bewitched by the illusion that we have no needs that cannot instantly be met, that we are omnipotent, that we control our own lives. Illusions of power become dangerous when we try to live them out by controlling others. This deformation of our humanity takes on exceptional force because it is driven by a deep, inchoate fear. The spirituals speak of an alternative. They reveal the capability of the human spirit to transcend bitter sorrow and to resist the persistent attempts of evil to strike it down.

... One Sunday last December, at the start of a very bleak winter, I stood in the front of Sts. Peter and Paul Orthodox Church to receive the sacrament of chrismation. The priest anointed my head, eyes, nostrils, ears, lips, chest, hands and feet with holy oil and gave me a lit candle to hold as I stood for Divine Liturgy. After the anointing I thought about the last step in the process of icon painting, which is the application of warm oil. The oil serves to bind together the colors of the icon and to bring out their depth. At the beginning of the liturgy we sing the words of Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name." And I am moved once again by the sad joyfulness of the chant tones. Once again I feel the prayers of the congregation as if their hands hold me up. I think back to the night of Pascha when we had processed around the church with lit candles and then stood at the doors of the church chanting, "Christ is risen!" When the doors opened and we all moved into the church, I felt the presence of generations of Christians standing with us, generations moving into the church with us, present with us on Pascha, our ancestors in the faith.

Our nation too has ancestors. Now, as much as ever, we stand in need of their presence. We, the American people, need to hear and to listen to the stories of all our forefathers and mothers. We need to be informed by the memories of their lives. Can these bones live, these dry bones? If we allow them to be reknit and re-membered. Memory, story, ritual these are all ways of re-membering a community broken by hate, rage, injustice, fear. Not to avenge, nor to make up for, not undoing what cannot be undone, but perhaps to heal. There are those who fear that the sto-

ries will not cohere, that they will remain a disparate set of unrelated or conflict-ridden experiences that only confirm our feelings of divisiveness, us against them. Perhaps, but I am convinced that if we listen, truly listen to the stories of others, something else will happen. We will find ourselves intrigued by the drama of these stories, moved by their poignancy and, finally, surprised at the common humanity that lies beneath their distinctive details. Finally, what we hold in common is a set of shared stories. If we seek commonality, we will discover it in the telling and listening to each other's stories, confident that an adequate history of the varied races and religions who came to dwell in this land will reflect our continually expanding American identity. Because of our habitual tendency to repeat one congratulatory story, while excluding others that do not fit a celebratory mood, we must resist the collective pressure to abandon, deny or forget the particular stories of all our people and our connection to them.

... I grew up without knowing the full story of my father's death. My mother and my stepfather decided not to tell me until I started college because they did not want me to grow up hating white folks. As a result, I wondered if the story were shameful, otherwise they would have told me. I never knew my father. I had no memories of him. I had no stories of him—only one blurry picture. I knew only his absence. Several months ago I went back to Mississippi in search of my father. I didn't know what I would find after all this time, only that I needed to go. I talked to aunts and uncles, cousins and close family friends. I found two newspaper accounts of his death. I spoke with the son of the man who killed my father. On the last day of my trip, I went to visit my father's grave. I had been there many times before, but, for the first time, I suddenly began to cry. I cried for him, for my mother, for my sisters, for a father and son who never met. Then, as if in memory, I saw him. I saw him laughing, I saw him raging, I saw him shot and falling, falling into my arms, into my life. After all these years of waiting, my father and I finally met. I bend down, pick up some dirt from his grave and rub it on my head. All the sorrow wells up inside me and merges with the joy of meeting him, finally for the first time...

It is fire in the bones.



